

United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 9: Human Rights Education

Especially Selected Topic

As prepared for delivery by Michael Haltzel
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Thank you, Mr. Moderator,

I would like to directly address the questions that you yourself posed a few minutes ago.

There is a saying: “You can’t get to where you want to go, if you don’t know where you came from.” We believe that for human rights education to be effective -- and intellectually honest -- it must be taught in its full historical context. Permit me to explain. Most of the history of the last four centuries since the establishment of the first European settlements on the territory of what is now the United States of America, I would submit, is laudable. Much, however, is not, and the whole story must be told.

Native Americans were, more often than not, brutally suppressed and dispossessed. The dehumanizing enslavement of African-Americans persisted until less than 150 years ago. During the 1940’s, thousands of loyal Japanese-Americans were interned in camps, victims of war hysteria. Mr. Moderator, these and other discriminatory policies left deep-seated scars on generations of our citizens and on our national psyche.

It took time -- arguably much too long -- to come to terms with this dark side of our history, but ultimately we did. Today a magnificent new Museum of the American Indian graces the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in which Native Americans confidently tell the story of their people. Not far away is a dignified monument to the Japanese-Americans who were humiliated during World War II. And also within walking distance is the White House, the residence of the President of the United States, an African-American who has inspired our citizens and countless others around the world. I might add that our First Lady, of which I am immensely proud, is the great-great-granddaughter of a slave. These are but three examples of the progress we have made in the ongoing multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious experiment that is the United States of America.

We believe that in teaching human rights every country should be prepared to admit its historical failings, just as every country justifiably celebrates its positive achievements. In that context, Mr. Moderator, we find the criminalization of interpreting unpleasant chapters of a nation’s history in a way that is at variance with an officially approved government version to be both intellectually and morally bankrupt. Only by facing up to even the most painful errors, especially to past violations of human rights, will future generations have guideposts by which to measure national progress.

Thank you for your attention.